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Doing Christian Social Ethics in Ireland

From Hiberno-Christendom to Fragile Pluralism

Zusammenfassung
Der Essay stellt die Praxis Christlicher Sozialethik (CSE) an Universitäten und in kirchlichen Gruppen in Irland vor und gibt einen Überblick über christlich-sozialethische Forschung anhand zweier theologischer Zeitschriften. Der irische Kontext ist überschattet von den jüngeren traumatischen Berichten über Kindesmissbrauch und die beschämenden Antworten vieler kirchlicher Autoritäten. Diese Krise wurde durch eine Verbindung zwischen Staat und Kirche im post-revolutionären Irland verschärft, die als Hiberno-Christentum bezeichnet werden kann. Die Konsequenz aus der Krise für die Christliche Sozialethik ist das Projekt der Entwicklung eines Paradigmas, auf zeitgenössische kritische Fragen in einem pluralen und globalisierten Kontext Antworten geben zu können, die einer interdisziplinären ethischen Reflexion erwachsen sind.

Abstract
This essay examines the practice of Christian Social Ethics (CSE) in universities and ecclesial groups, and surveys CSE research through the lens of two theological journals. The Irish context is overshadowed by the recent traumatic reports into child abuse and the shameful responses by many Church leaders. This crisis was shaped by a relationship between Church and State in post-Independence Ireland, identifiable as an attempt at Hiberno-Christendom. The interdisciplinary ethical reflection emerging from this crisis is an ongoing project, a paradigm for CSE as it seeks to respond to other critical contemporary issues in a more pluralist and globalised context.

Christian Social Ethics (CSE) is woven into the fabric of academic theology in Ireland, and is also operative in the research and practice of Christian non-governmental and ecclesial bodies. This short essay offers a sketch of trends and themes, and the examples discussed are indicative rather than exhaustive. It will begin with an examination of the context in Ireland which shapes the doing of CSE, a context which is overshadowed by the crimes and scandals of the past decade in which the Catholic Church has been implicated.

1 Traumatic Reports

In 2009, the so called Ryan and Murphy reports – named after the judges who chaired the commissions of inquiry – were published within months of each other in Ireland, reports which have resulted in what has been described as a "national trauma" (cf. The Murphy Report 2009; The Ryan Report 2009).[1] The Ryan Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse highlights the voices of those who had been abused in institutions run by 18 religious congregations. It is a report dominated by the poignant narratives of victims. The Murphy report examines the clerical sexual abuse scandals in the archdiocese of Dublin and its devastating critique is directed at the response of church leadership to this abuse. The opening paragraph of the Murphy Report describes the Dublin Archdiocese's preoccupation in dealing with sexual abuse scandals, at least until the mid-1990s: the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, and the protection of the reputation of the Church.

The Ryan and Murphy Reports, together with the later report on the Catholic Diocese of Cloyne (cf. The Cloyne Report 2011), present a spectrum of cruelty and abuse, of political cowardice, and of complicity between Church and State. Many church leaders erroneously sought refuge in canon law, failing to recognize that child abuse is not only a moral issue but also a criminal matter. Distorted loyalty to the institution too often took precedence over the protection of the dignity of the human person, in particular that of vulnerable children, and the negative effects of being ignored or blamed constituted an exacerbation of the original trauma.

Initially, there was a tendency towards mono-causal explanations and one-dimensional responses, focusing mainly on what Robert Orsi (2002) calls "biopolitical interpretations".[2] The causes proposed included: distorted attitudes toward sexuality combined with mandatory clerical celibacy; the lack of consultation with parents; institutional dynamics and particular ecclesiologies; or, as Pope Benedict XVI (2010, par. 4) suggested – in his somewhat controversial letter to the people of Ireland – in secularization and a misinterpretation of the programme of renewal proposed by the Second Vatican Council.

1 The Ferns Report, released in 2005, was the first official Irish government inquiry into the allegations of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic diocese of Ferns.

2 Orsi argues that the roots of the crisis lie in our troubled theology of childhood.

There has been a gradual movement in Ireland beyond mono-causal explanations and one-dimensional responses in an effort to understand the complex web of causes and effects. A number of significant conferences engaged in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary exploration of the crisis. The conversation between theologians and historians is particularly important for a broader and deeper understanding of the complex historical, political, and social background to the reports. The role of *An Garda Síochána* (police), the judiciary, medical personnel and child welfare agencies in the Irish abuse scandals highlights the broader social responsibility which has yet to be addressed. We now turn to examine the relationship between the Church and the State in post-Independence Ireland that may have enabled this collusion.

2 Hiberno-Christendom

In *A Catholic Modernity?* (cf. Heft 1999, 17) Charles Taylor holds that the affirmation of radically unconditional universal human rights in modern liberal political culture could never have emerged from Christendom, a civilization where the institutions and culture are meant to reflect the Christian nature of society. Christendom is a society centered on a hierarchical church which orders and gives meaning not only to religion but also to cultural and intellectual life, to family and education, to economy and politics. This comprehensive community and accompanying moral vision means that the 'other' is either tolerated or excluded, but is rarely seen as a source of enrichment through dialogue. Taylor notes that Christendom had its benefits, but it also wed a coercive political structure to the gospel in a way that did not trust the Holy Spirit, but the sword. Such a society, Taylor suggests, might have difficulties in accepting full equality of rights for atheists or for those who violate the Christian moral code, e. g. homosexuals. He concludes that the reason for these difficulties lies not within Christianity itself, but within the particular project of Christendom. This is the project through which the Catholic Church created the authoritative background in which European governance was set, and the demise of this project of Christendom was beneficial for both freedom and faith.

The Ryan and Murphy reports have uncovered a shameful collusion of Church and State in modern Ireland, what might be called a project of Hiberno-Christendom (cf. Regan 2009), a project which also was

not without its benefits. The contribution of the Catholic Church to education, healthcare and social services, while not devoid of classism, reflected both solidarity with the poor and a commitment to building a just society through the provision of such services. However, Hiberno-Christendom was not sufficiently hospitable to the 'other' in terms of religious belief. It was more hostile to those who violated the Catholic sexual ethic founded on a reductive and physicalist variant of natural law. This ethic shaped discussions about sexual matters in the polis and, as Taylor notes in his treatment of Christendom, created difficulties for the acceptance of full equality for both atheists and those who violated the Christian moral code. The revelations of abuse have shown that those who suffered most were vulnerable, mostly poor, children.

The special position of the Catholic Church in independent Ireland (post-1922) wedded a particular understanding of natural law to a nationalist politic (to be understood in the context of a history of colonial oppression), producing a coercive political structure whose demise has been beneficial, to use Taylor's terms, both for freedom and for faith. The fading of the project of Hiberno-Christendom pre-dates the current crisis, for in the years since Vatican II a new relationship between the Church and the world was being forged by the creative pastoral writing and thoughtful academic work of many ethicists and theologians in Ireland. New understandings of social justice and of cultural and religious pluralism were enabling a mature departure from the Church of Hiberno-Christendom. However, much of this work has been overshadowed by the abuse crisis in which many of the bishops reverted to the presuppositions of Hiberno-Christendom in their dealings with the scandals. This has resulted in an accelerated demise, marked by an unprecedented loss of integrity and trust, and the growth of what might be termed 'reactive secularism'. There are calls for the Church's influence to be purged from all roles in education and healthcare and there is a strong lobby to silence any contribution by the Church in the public square. This needs to be challenged in the interests of a genuine and – to use a Rawlsian term – 'reasonable' pluralism and the pursuit of the common good. The particular challenge for the Church is to transform this enforced marginality into a redemptive and prophetic liminality.

The crisis that has emerged from the totality of the child abuse scandals is a theological-ethical project for the universal Church, but one that must also be inculturated by the Church in Ireland. The interdisciplinary

research that has emerged as a result of this crisis is important as an ongoing ethical project, but it also offers a model of the kind of interdisciplinary work that is possible for those engaged in CSE relating to a number of critical contemporary issues.

3 Doing Christian Social Ethics: Universities and Ecclesial Groups

Christian Social Ethics most often finds expression in universities as an area of moral theology. A pontifical faculty is more likely to focus on Catholic Social Teaching, although this would include ecumenical perspectives on social ethics. Some colleges and universities use the term CSE rather than CST, giving extensive attention to CST but with greater ecumenical and, increasingly, interfaith engagement. In my own institution, Dublin City University, undergraduate CSE links theory and practice by incorporating service-learning with the historical and theoretical aspects of social ethics. The Irish School of Ecumenics at Trinity College, Dublin, has a distinctive focus on conflict and peace studies. Overall, CSE is considered to be a sub-section of moral theology or theological ethics. It is a key part of undergraduate programmes across a variety of university settings. There is an element of optionality in postgraduate programmes and CSE is among a number of areas of theological ethics students may choose. The extent of engagement between CSE and other theological disciplines, such as Biblical Studies or Systematic Theology, varies from institution to institution.

The challenge related to the status of CSE in the university is reflective of the question of the status of theology in Irish universities. There is, for example, very little research funding for theology in Ireland. A CSE specialist would not automatically be considered for inclusion as part of dialogue about matters of social concern in the public domain. The onus, in many instances, is on the theologian to initiate such dialogue. There are instances of collaboration between theological ethicists and other scholars in areas such as bioethics, business ethics, environmental ethics, and human rights. The MA Ethics programme in Dublin City University includes contributions from theological ethics and comparative religious ethics, but overall there is unexplored potential in terms of these religious-secular collaborations in the field of ethics. Irish

theologians working in CSE generally hold very high standards – shaped by the standards and priorities of the contemporary university in terms of teaching and research – but it could also be argued that their rigor may not be given adequate recognition due to some hostility towards the discipline of theology itself.

Outside of the university sector, two examples of other agencies that engage publicly with CSE are the *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice* (JCFJ) and the *Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference*. The JCFJ produces a small journal – *Working Notes* – which focuses on social, economic, and theological analysis of Irish society, with particular attention to economics, Church structural policy, penal policy, housing, and environmental justice.[3] The JCFJ's most recent publication on young adults in prison was welcomed by the Irish Penal Reform Trust, an example of the relationship that exists between CSE and non-governmental organizations which share common areas of concern or focus.[4]

The *Council for Justice and Peace* supports the Irish bishops in promoting the social teaching of the Church and advises on issues of social ethics, nationally and internationally. The Council – lay experts and bishops – produced a number of position papers on areas such as health care, poverty, violence, and the economic crisis. These papers are substantive ethical reflections on social issues and are informed by other scientific disciplines. The papers provide an opportunity for the Church to contribute to the broader conversation about social ethics in the country. In recent years, after the publication of the reports into child abuse, it has been more difficult for that official ecclesiastical voice to make a contribution or for that contribution to be accepted. This difficulty was compounded by an internal decision of the Irish episcopal conference to adopt a protocol whereby the approval of all the bishops is needed for all statements of the *Council for Justice and Peace*. This inhibited the Council in terms of its capacity to respond to issues in a dynamic and timely manner.

3 For further information see *http://www.workingnotes.ie/*, accessed, July 1, 2016.
4 For further information see *http://www.iprt.ie/contents/2918/*, accessed, July 1, 2016.

4 Research in Christian Social Ethics: through the lens of two journals

Irish theologians engaged with CSE publish monographs, volumes of essays, and articles in a variety of international journals. This essay will focus on two journals published in Ireland which attract both national and international authors, the refereed *Irish Theological Quarterly* (ITQ), and the more pastoral Dominican publication *Doctrine and Life* (DL). While the latter is not peer-reviewed, it is excellently edited and is respected in both academic and ecclesial circles. For this country report, I surveyed the discussion of CSE in both journals for the decade (2005–2015).

ITQ is "committed to the advancement of constructive and critical scholarship" in systematic, moral, and historical theology.[5] Research in CSE in ITQ during this period was represented by just nine articles, and it is notable that there are few references to the reports that have overshadowed the Irish Catholic Church. An article by Robert Gascoigne (2014) asks: "Can Catholic Social Thought help to alleviate Liturgical Tensions?" Two articles on debt relief and an economist's response to *Caritas in Veritate*, represent the dialogue between CSE and economics (cf. Pecchenino 2011; Peschke 2005; 2006). There are two articles on the concept of the common good (cf. Mulligan 2010; Riordan 2011). The remaining three CSE articles are an assessment of the 2003 U. S. led Iraq war (cf. Brugger 2009), an examination of George Grant's essay on abortion (cf. Allsopp 2013), and a reflection on "Religion, the Constitution, and the New Ireland" by Patrick Hannon (2009). These excellent essays could be augmented by more Irish experts in CSE publishing in a high-ranking journal like ITQ.

CSE is reflected in a wide range of articles in DL.[6] What is striking is the variety of voices – lay and cleric, professional and pastoral, national and international – and the range of CSE topics covered. The perspectives are ecumenical and interdisciplinary. There is, of course, a different momentum to publishing in a non-refereed journal, where the peer-review process means that one cannot respond to issues with the same pace and dynamism. DL is thus able to respond more quickly to issues, allowing a responsive Christian social ethics to emerge. An examination of the

5 For further information see *http://itq.sagepub.com/*, accessed August 2, 2016.

6 For further information see *https://www.dominicanpublications.com/journals/category/12-doctrine-and-life/*, accessed, July 1, 2016.

trajectory of articles in DL offers an interesting insight into pastoral-academic CSE in Ireland during the period. An article by Kevin Egan (2006) examined institutional denial in light of the Ferns Report and a US report, a theme which would emerge in sharper relief after the publication of the Ryan and Murphy reports in 2009. Key themes addressed in 2008 include the Lisbon Treaty and the ethics of economic activity. However, articles published after the 2009 reports show CSE moving towards significant ethical analysis of church policy and practice and, to a lesser extent, social-ethical analysis of societal factors which contributed to and colluded with institutional abuse. The articles published in DL from 2012 onwards communicate a sense that theologians, albeit shaken by the impact of the revelations of abuse, are committed to giving effective voice to Christian social ethics in the public sphere.

5 Challenges and Opportunities

There is a wide range of views in CSE in Ireland, from theologians who would self-identify as liberal to those who self-identify as conservative, but the oppositional approach of Stanley Hauerwas, William Cavanaugh, and Radical Orthodoxy's John Milbank is not reflected as strongly in the work of Irish theologians. It could be argued that CSE in Ireland has a distinctively 'Catholic' approach, that is, one which – without denying a distinctively Christian perspective on social ethics – holds that we can reason together about what is good and just with men and women of good will. The Church of Ireland bishop Richard Clarke's (2015) writing on "The Church in the Public Square" argues: "If, however, the Church wishes to be heard with respect in public debate and discussion, it must concentrate on being intelligent and intelligible, and both of these in secular terms" (ibid., 8).

The key challenges for contemporary Christian Social Ethics in Ireland are:

1. The need for CSE to be part of the ongoing historical-ethical analysis and constructive ethics that responds to the national and ecclesial traumas of recent year. CSE needs to bring its voice to bear on discussions about just memory and restorative justice.
2. Priority must also be given to the development of an ethics of ecclesiology, important not just for the church *ad intra*, but essential for

greater credibility for CSE when addressing the challenges of social ethics *ad extra*.
3. CSE needs to further engage with the social-ethical questions for which our generation of scholars will be asked to account for our responses to, for example, climate justice, migration, nuclear weapons, and poverty.
4. There is potential for creative intradisciplinary research within theology more broadly, and more courageous interdisciplinary engagement by CSE across the humanities and social sciences, especially on the key challenges facing humanity today.

These challenges are also the areas where social ethical networking in Europe could offer opportunities for reciprocal learning among ethicists in order to develop more effective responses to what are transnational problems and challenges. Christian Social Ethics in Ireland faces these challenges in the context of the shadows of Hiberno-Christendom and a developing, but fragile, reasonable pluralism.

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